John Seacombe Oral History Recording Transcript

This is Lorraine Simpson and I'm interviewing John Seacombe for the Oral History project around the Kirkgate Calling Project in Wakefield.

So John, you've told me a little bit about your early life but can you tell me where you were born? Yes, I was born in Ipswich Maternity Hospital, near the docks, in 1947; the coldest winter of last century, apparently. The ambulance skidded on the way to the maternity home with me inside. Um, I don't remember much about it – I do remember seeing my little sister after she'd just been born in there but it's sadly been swept away now by, um, new development and I think all maternity services are carried out at the general hospital like they would be in Wakefield I think at Pinderfields.

Do you remember anything about, um, the neighbourhood that you were born and brought up in?

Um, I don't remember anything at all about the neighbourhood I was born in because we moved away after eight months and I don't really remember my second childhood home in Coventry, but I have very vivid and long-standing memories of my third childhood home which was at a Boys, um, a Naval Boys boarding school in Suffolk on the banks of the River Stour and we started off life in a boarding house of sixty boys so we slept downstairs and the boys slept upstairs and had day rooms at either side of us. My father was the housemaster so I got used to the naval way of life very early on in life and there were bugle calls and parades and things and this never actually prompted me to go into the armed forces but I've always got a soft spot for the Navy as opposed to the army or the air force.

And do you have happy memories of that school?

Well, as a home, yes, but I wasn't allowed to attend it because my father hadn't served in the forces, in the naval, in the navy during the war. He was in the army so I was ineligible to go to the school but I don't think I would have liked to have gone to the school that he was teaching at anyway, so yes, I do have very happy memories of my early childhood. (Cough) When I was about six we moved to a proper house up on the road,a semi-detached house and two years later we moved to another house which had five bedrooms and a quarter of an acre of gardens, absolute bliss for me at the age of eight. We only rented it but, boy, it was a wonderful place, that, to grow up in and we had a thing the size of a tennis court where you could play cricket without the ball going over the hedge very often and we had bikes so we could cycle all around the school grounds which were about 1000 acres and stretched right down to the river. And so yes, it was an idyllic childhood from that point of view.

So where did you actually go to school?

I actually went to school in Ipswich, um, I started off at a couple of village schools; I didn't like the second village school at all so I went to a little private preparatory school for two terms, then I went to another school which was called Ipswich School and I was there, would you believe, for eleven and a half years which I think was a bit of a mistake in retrospect – went there when I was seven and a half and left just before I was nineteen and I think that was too long to stay in one school. (Laughs) So I did have some very good teaching there later on and um, I met some very interesting people. I don't think it was a very happy experience for me.. on the.. I was basically a square peg in a round hole because I didn't like school and it was a very sporty school but some good sides to it which I do prefer to think about.

So what could you describe as a typical school day?

We get there for prayers in the chapel or assembling in the general school in the morning, then we go off to our classrooms, have three classes before break and then at breaktime we go and see if we are wanted by the prefects which meant a slippering and then we had twenty minutes and back

for two more periods of class and then at lunchtime I had the acute, incredible luxury of going to my grandparents for lunch because school food was absolutely appalling and my father said it was absolutely appalling when he went there much later. And then in the afternoon it was a very bitty affair because we'd start classes at twenty past two, three o'clock or whenever and a lot of the afternoon would be given up to preparation for sports. Three afternoons a week, including Saturday, we had sports. Monday, Wednesday and Friday we had classes. On Monday we had the Combined Cadet Force which I never belonged to because it was felt I would be better in the Scouts and I enjoyed the Scouts a lot more than I would have done the CCF in retrospect but I felt a real 'wuss' at the time, joining the boy scouts instead of joining the CCF and learning to school rifles and all the manly things that boys in the CCF did. (Laughs) So it was a very mixed feeling. I've never been back to school since I was about twenty and I probably won't ever go back again now.

Right, that's a very detailed memory

Yes it is, it's imprinted.

So if we can move on to the world of work?

Yes.

What was your first job, John?

Well I had a temporary job, a lovely job working at the borough engineers office at Ipswich borough engineers before leaving school and going to Uni and my line manager was a wonderful chap and he was very generous and very kind and I was doing all sorts of menial jobs like making signs for new roads and generally doing things in the traffic division. It was just when the new road marking system which we had came into being and I was involved in implementing that which was very interesting work indeed. Then I had a short temporary job at Uni and then my first real job was in Barnsley. And it was because I wanted to train, study part time for my TPI qualification.

TPI is?

Town Planning. And I went to Leeds Polytechnic three nights a week after I had finished work, for three hours, and so we'd start work at quarter to nine and finished about half past five except for college nights when they let me leave about half past four to drive up the M1 and I did that with a group of other lads and it wasn't too bad. But I really hated that first job. It was dealing with the coalfields around Hemsworth and I didn't like (inaud) it was development control with a very low level of activity in the office and I felt bored and fed up with it and after nearly three years I wanted to get out. This was at the time when local government reorganisation was taking shape and there was a job going with the old Leeds County Borough so I applied for that and got the job much to my amazement and incredible delight. I though knew I wouldn't get paid as much as if I'd stayed in my old job and got a job in Doncaster or Barnsley I just felt that Leeds was the place to be. So having arrived in Leeds in '74 I worked there for seventeen years and enjoyed quite a lot of it, it had its ups and downs and then life changed for me quite a lot.

And so how did you end up in Wakefield, then?

Well the reason I ended up in Wakefield was because I was working in Barnsley and my wife was in Uni and she wanted a job in retail sales management in Leeds and she was offered a job in Lewis's, as it was, if you remember Lewis's and she, we thought that if one of us works in Leeds and the other works in Barnsley it's sensible to live in Wakefield because Wakefield looked a more sensitive place for us to live rather than Barnsley. We did try some places in Barnsley but we didn't really take to it as a living place. So we lived in a little asbestos house in Lawefield Lane for about eighteen months and then we got a house up at Hollingthorpe, our first proper house and then we stayed there for about five or six years until the smell of the pig farm drove us out but having all this

time we stayed, stuck to Wakefield because after three years of me being at Barnsley my wife decided she'd had enough of retail management and she wanted to be a teacher so she went to Bretton College for a year and then she worked at Crofton Shay Lane so we were like reversing our work roles in terms of location but we still felt it was desirable to live in Wakefield by which time we'd got our house and didn't want to move from Wakefield. And so we've had geographical inertia ever since then.

And so what year would it have been when you came to Wakefield?

Er, '71. So I started in Barnsley in a gentleman's guest house which was really a lodging house, for six months and that taught me a great deal because coming from a rather sheltered southern background, rubbing shoulders with gas fitters and miners and people who dug holes in roads; they were very kind and generous to me and we'd go out to the pub and they let me have some of their cigarettes and I'd listen to their Jim Reeves records in recompense and one guy who was illiterate, wanted me to write a love letter to his girlfriend in Swansea so I sat down on his bed and wrote some love letters for him, dictated by him, I just made it grammatical 'cos that was me. And then he took me out for a night on the town as a reward and I drank seven pints of Guinness without whisky chasers so I was really ill the next morning. But I was lectured by some of the other people in the guest house 'don't go out with Billy again because he's like that. (Laughs) So it was quite a colourful time in my life.

It sounds very interesting. So if we can move on specifically to Kirkgate because that's what the project is about – do you have specific memories of Kirkgate?

Yes, a lot, a lot. Because I arrived for my interview for my job in Barnsley at Kirkgate Station because that was the quick, the usual way to get from Leeds to Wakefield in those days. A train every hour, via, not via Castleford. And I walked from Kirkgate along Ings Road to Raines House, as was, and got my job offer there, and then when I started living in Wakefield it was a bit of a problem getting to Barnsley because we didn't have a car so I borrowed my father's 1938 Ilswick? Hopper bike and I'd cycle along Ings Road which was only single track in those days to Kirkgate Station, wait under the overall station roof, put my bike on the train, got off in Barnsley Station, got off the train and cycled up over Mount Vernon down to Worsborough Bridge where the job was actually there for me. And I did this for about two or three months and then it got dark and cold and classes started up at college again and I thought, this can't go on, so I bought a very elderly Morris Minor which lasted me for four years. So this was a much better way of getting around but sadly after that I rather lost my affinity with Wakefield Kirkgate Station but, as I was saying earlier on in this project, we did have these one pound twenty five tickets from Wakefield Kirkgate which were mystery trips. One of these mystery trips took us to Aberystwith, one took us to Windsor, one took us to um, oh gosh, I think one took us to Llandudno or Bangor. Anyway they took us all over the place and they were really good value in 1971, with these ancient coaches which were not used during the week and this rather ancient diesel loco and they hauled us round the countryside and they wouldn't tell us until we had actually started off from Kirkgate where we were going. And so it was great fun. And then, after that, my association with Kirkgate lapsed for rather a long time until I did make the occasional journey into Leeds in the eighties but it was a very slow journey in those days. And then I started getting interested in Kirkgate Station about seven or eight years ago when they improved the train service and I discovered that Kirkgate Station was a much more convenient and comfortable way of getting into Leeds compared with Sandal Station which was my usual station stop and so I started driving to Kirkgate Station, parked my car at Kirkgate as you could in those days, got on the train, had a lovely smooth ride from Kirkgate via the Aire valley into Leeds. So I tended to use it as my default station for going into Leeds commuting in my latter years of work.

Can you remember what Kirkgate Station was like when you used it?

It was horrible (laughs). It was decrepit in the seventies and it had got even worse in the eighties and by the late nineties, early two thousand it was a really awful place. There was a canopy on

Platform One which had been erected when they pulled down the overall roof and by the early two thousands, this was rotten and rain was dripping through it onto the passengers below. I didn't have to wait on the other side because of course I got off the train and the subway was foul before they tarted it up about seven or eight years ago. The station just had a feeling of utter neglect and despair and it's alright waiting at half past seven in the morning. Oh yes, and I did also use it for going to Manchester some days because I could go, when I left Leeds I worked at another place for four years, I worked in Leeds and Manchester on another job and I had to go to Manchester so I got the train from Wakefield. Some days it would go right through to Manchester Victoria which was very convenient, so I've used it a lot more in the last ten years than I did in the preceding 20 years and I have seen it change quite dramatically. And nowadays of course I use it for going to London on the train because it's cheaper than Westgate Station if you use the Grand Central (inaud)? at Kirkgate Station and in fact the work is starting to look a lot better. I feel it's the sort of place where you can go at night and my poor daughter said she was going to come and meet me at Wakefield, didn't specify which station of course so I went to meet her at Westgate and there she was at Kirkgate outside the derelict Wakefield Arms, all along, completely in the dark and she was thirty at the time and she's a very street-cred sort of kid so no harm done there but I think a some slightly more nervous young lady would have had dicky fits waiting at Kirkgate Station in those circumstances.

Did it have any buildings, did it have any waiting rooms?

No. It did when I first, there was a First Class waiting room, people don't remember that, and I believe there was a Refreshment Room as well, which was not operated by British Rail. There was a First Class waiting room and a Second Class waiting room on Platform One, I do remember that because it was etched into the glass – it was quite posh. Then on Platform Two, um, nothing much doing on Platform Two or Platform Three and they had staff of course, in the seventies, plenty of staff around, but they'd all gone by the eighties, it was just a bus stop platform. And then the overall roof went and they had that funny structure on the east end of Platform Two which had started growing trees out of it which was pulled down three or four years ago when they rebuilt all that bit. So, what else can I say about Kirkgate? It had the look of a station which should have been quite a posh sort of station when it was opened and in fact, I thought it was a posher station that Westgate, 'cos Westgate was one of these horrible 1960s lavatory towel buildings which, slightly glad it's been pulled down recently. And replaced by that gleaming new structure at the far end. So yeah, I though Kirkgate Station was a more classy station than Westgate Station when I first knew it but sadly it went right downhill by the time I had finished using it and it is starting to turn a corner now I hope. And I can remember the old Booking Hall as well. You were actually able to book tickets in the Booking Hall from somebody behind a little cubby hole in those days, in the seventies, there was still staff there and I'm sure there was staff on the platform when I was twenty four with my ancient bike, quite a lot of them and then they all, then the roof came off and that was the beginning of the end for Kirkgate because they didn't really need the roof but it never really looked that same after that.

Thank you very much for sharing your memories of Kirkgate, John.